

Reflection for Sunday 13 June

In Western Europe and North America, the church continues to decline in both numbers and influence. Elsewhere, in many other places, it's growing fast. Some estimates suggest that it may be overtaken by Islam by the middle of the century, but at the moment, with around 2.3 billion members and over 31% of the global population, Christianity is, in numerical terms, the world's top religion. From such tiny beginnings in Palestine two millennia ago, that would seem to count as success by most standards.

This may seem like good news, but we must be careful not to assume that growth of the church means that God's kingdom has grown at the same rate. The is because the church often falls short of kingdom values.

Although at its best, the church is an inspiring movement of faith and hope, it's also a decidedly human institution, with all the faults and manifest failings that we all know so well.

Jesus makes it very clear to us that although we're invited to sow the seeds of the kingdom, its true growth is down to God alone – and that will take us by surprise. It also means that God remains quietly at work even in those times and places where the church appears to be failing.

Such considerations would not, I think, have been remotely on the radar of those who first heard Jesus or first read St Mark's Gospel. For them, the bigger question one of was how on earth could such a raggedy little group of folk change the world? How might God work in and through them? Jesus's message must have given them hope. They may have seemed as inconsequential as the tiny mustard seeds they knew so well, but the promise of spectacular growth was inspirational.

The language Jesus uses, according to Mark, will have rung bells with them of Old Testament prophecies too of Israel being a like a great tree in which other nations would find shelter and shade. And yet God's kingdom would also be very different from the images that such a train of thought might lead them to believe. It wouldn't be like a human empire in which old scores would be settled and the world would be judged. Its growth would be mysterious, growing from seeds that are already sown. In fact, if you have eyes to see and ears to hear, it's already here.

So how were those first disciples to respond to this news – and what are we to do too? The very clear message Jesus gives us is that the growth of God's kingdom is entirely in God's hands, but that this doesn't mean we can sit back and do nothing. Time and again, Jesus stresses the need for us to seize the moment, get out there and by our words and action to spread the seed of the Good News of God's transforming love.

This is still what we're called to do without the distraction of thinking how this might translate into a Christian empire or even, dare I say, church growth. It's not that we shouldn't want to see the church grow and prosper, of course we do, but that church growth in itself is not what the kingdom's about, and it's not the primary reason why Jesus calls us to be his friends and disciples.

It's hard to re-capture the sense of excitement and wonder that the first followers of Jesus must have felt, but after two thousand years of Christendom, I fear that even if we could recapture some of that excitement and hope, we've rather lost the ability to imagine how God's kingdom might grow in ways other than as a reflection of human society. In other words, we keep falling into the trap of imagining that God's kingdom can only be like an earthly empire – or church, or charity. But of, course, it doesn't and never will.

This is such a hard message to take to heart, but in this time of uncertainty and apparent decline for the church in this part of the world, it's more important almost than ever before that our first duty as followers of Jesus is to live in a simple, costly, Christ-like way rather than investing all our time into re-imagining, in a narrow way, an institution that will always be a pale and inadequate shadow of the kingdom. In other words, the prayer, the generosity, the kindness, the faithfulness to the Gospel, the commitment to one another, the love must always come first.

If we can cling onto this vision we'll be moving in the right direction, but we'll have to dig deep to find the grace to accept that even when we seem to fail, God's kingdom can and will grow – and indeed – is already with us. It's such a hard lesson, but one that is so central to the teaching of Jesus.

In a group of parishes like the one I'm called and privileged to serve, the most pressing needs, day by day, seem to be how do we (literally) keep the roof on the building – or raise the money for a new one. How do we keep the show on the road with so few people to do all the jobs we're required to do? It's very easy to focus so much on all that that we lose sight of this vitally important bigger picture.

Today, Jesus reminds us again that while we cannot simply walk away from the inheritance of the past, from the gifts that previous generations have passed onto us, our first duty is to sow the seeds of the kingdom and trust that God alone will give the growth – whatever that may be. The values of the kingdom must always come first, the kingdom that is already amongst us can we but taste and see it.

And as Jesus also said: strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. So do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today's trouble is enough for today.